

Expendable Bodies and the Human Cost of Development in *The Coffe Dams*

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Abstract

*Discussions of development often move toward the language of success: dams completed, rivers controlled, and technologies improved. What such narratives often conceal is the human labour that makes transformation possible. Progress is rarely represented as something built through exhaustion, injury, danger, and the slow erosion of dignity. In many postcolonial settings, modernization depends upon workers whose safety is neglected and whose suffering remains marginal to official accounts of achievement. Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffe Dams* brings this hidden reality into focus by portraying development as a process sustained through bodily risk and unequal exposure to harm. This paper argues that the novel presents labouring bodies as expendable within the larger machinery of progress. At the same time, it reveals moments of care, recognition, and ethical resistance that interrupt the logic of dehumanisation. By placing workers at the centre of the narrative, the novel questions triumphalist accounts of modernization and asks whose lives make development possible.*

Keywords: *development, labour, postcolonial modernity, expendability, industrial violence, Kamala Markandaya*

Introduction

Modern development is frequently described through the language of economic growth, national advancement, and technological success. Yet these narratives often hide the labour on which they depend. Large infrastructure projects are not built by machines alone; they rely on intense physical work carried out under dangerous conditions, often with little protection and less recognition. In many postcolonial societies, the greatest burden of progress falls upon workers whose suffering remains largely invisible.

It is within this tension between technological ambition and human vulnerability that Kamala Markandaya situates *The Coffe Dams*. Rather than presenting development as heroic achievement, the novel dwells on the ordinary realities of construction labour: exhaustion, constant risk, injury, and the acceptance of danger as routine. The dam does not rise through engineering knowledge alone. It rises through bodies repeatedly asked to absorb risk in the name of progress.

As the narrative unfolds, development comes to resemble less a collective good than a system that steadily consumes labour. What matters most is not the well-being of workers but their capacity to endure strain. When accidents occur, they rarely interrupt the project. Loss is briefly acknowledged before attention returns to deadlines, output, and technical necessity. In this way, suffering becomes normalized rather than exceptional.

At the same time, Markandaya does not portray workers only as passive victims of industrial change. Even within harsh conditions, gestures of sympathy, shared grief, and moral recognition continue to appear. These moments do not dismantle exploitation, but they resist the complete reduction of human beings to tools of production.

This paper examines how *The Coffer Dams* reveals the human cost of development through bodily risk, unequal exposure to danger, and the everyday acceptance of suffering. It argues that modernization in the novel advances by treating labour as expendable, while small ethical acts continue to challenge that logic.

Labour, Development, and Human Expendability

Modern development is commonly celebrated as economic growth and technological advancement. Critical scholarship, however, has increasingly asked what such progress requires and who bears its cost. Large projects often depend upon physically demanding labour performed under insecure and hazardous conditions. In postcolonial contexts especially, workers frequently carry the burden of modernization while receiving little of its rewards.

Within such systems, labour gradually comes to be treated less as human presence than as a resource to be used. Productivity and speed often outweigh safety and dignity. Human suffering becomes routine, and loss is managed rather than confronted. Development, in this sense, moves forward not despite vulnerability but through it.

This unequal distribution of risk recalls Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's argument that ethical life is shaped by social and material constraints rather than by abstract freedom. Choices are often conditioned by hierarchy, survival, and unequal access to power (Spivak, 1988, pp. 271–313). The labourers in *The Coffer Dams* occupy precisely such restricted spaces, where endurance is less a matter of heroism than necessity.

Yet exploitation in the novel never fully silences moral response. Even within harsh working conditions, workers continue to recognize one another's suffering, form relationships, and offer small acts of care. These gestures do not overturn the structures that confine them, but they prevent complete ethical erasure.

Seen in this light, *The Coffer Dams* extends beyond a story of engineering achievement. It becomes a meditation on how development reshapes the value of human life. Labour enables progress, but it also bears its greatest cost.

Slow Violence and the Normalisation of Harm

Large development projects in postcolonial contexts often rely not only on technology but also on the quiet acceptance of human loss. Rob Nixon (2011) describes this process as *slow violence*—harm that is gradual, dispersed, and normalized rather than spectacular. Markandaya dramatizes precisely this kind of violence in *The Coffer Dams*, where suffering becomes part of the ordinary rhythm of labour.

One of the most disturbing moments in the novel follows the massive rockslide that kills tribal workers. For the first time, the relentless industrial noise of the construction site falls silent:

“Then there was silence... It was silent, except for the wind and the trees and the clash of the clouds” (Markandaya, 2008, pp. 164–165).

This silence is more than the aftermath of an accident. Throughout the novel, noise signifies machinery, productivity, and movement. Silence therefore marks the intrusion of death into the mechanical rhythm of progress. For a brief moment, nature replaces industrial urgency, as if the world itself pauses in recognition of loss.

That pause, however, is quickly erased. Clinton reframes the tragedy in technical language:

“There is no need... to shift the boulder... the bodies can be incorporated into the structure” (Markandaya, 2008, p. 172).

The word *incorporated* belongs to engineering rather than mourning. Human remains are imagined as material to be absorbed into the foundation of the dam. Individual lives disappear into function. Death becomes a logistical matter rather than a moral rupture.

Necropolitics and Disposable Lives

Here development does not merely overlook death; it advances through it. The dam rises through the absorption of bodies into its very structure. This recalls Achille Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics, in which power determines whose lives are protected and whose deaths are tolerated for larger systems to continue (Mbembe, 2003, pp. 11–40).

The tribal labourers in *The Coffin Dams* occupy precisely such a position. Their deaths do not halt construction. Instead, mortality is folded into the continuation of progress.

Markandaya sharpens this critique by contrasting two forms of death. Earlier in the project, when British engineers die, work stops. Their bodies are recovered carefully, and formal mourning is observed. Time is made for grief. The interruption itself signals value.

The response differs sharply when tribal labourers are killed. Clinton declares:

“We have no time... to bring up the bodies. The rains are due. The dam is at risk” (Markandaya, 2008, p. 188).

The movement of the sentence is revealing. The dead appear only briefly before attention shifts to weather, schedule, and structure. Moral urgency is transferred from human loss to engineering delay.

This contrast exposes a hierarchy that is never openly declared yet constantly enacted. Some deaths receive ceremony; others are managed as obstacles. The right to be mourned becomes a measure of whose life counts.

Erasure, Memory, and Ethical Resistance

Headerson’s remark carries this logic further:

“In time the fish will have them” (Markandaya, 2008, p. 171).

The statement is chilling because it is spoken calmly. There is no visible shock or outrage. Death is absorbed into inevitability. Time and nature are expected to complete what the construction site has begun.

Ana Mužar (2022, pp. 342–356) argues that Markandaya exposes technological modernity as a system that normalizes dehumanisation while presenting itself as civilization. Headerson’s comment reflects this logic. Death is not a moral crisis requiring accountability; it is treated as something that will gradually disappear.

Against this indifference, Krishnan’s insistence on burial introduces another moral register. Burial is not merely ritual custom. It becomes a claim to dignity, memory, and recognition. To recover the bodies is to refuse their reduction to waste.

In a system that moves forward by forgetting, remembrance becomes a form of resistance. Krishnan cannot dismantle exploitation, but his insistence interrupts its ethical blindness.

Body as Machine: Bashiam and the Logic of Endurance

If earlier moments in the novel show how death is absorbed into the structure of development, Bashiam's decision to operate the defective crane brings this logic into sharper focus. Here, the human body becomes the last available tool when technology fails.

When machinery breaks down and risk remains, those in authority often withdraw from direct responsibility. The burden then shifts downward. What machines cannot manage is left to human strength and endurance.

"I must do it, since they are my people..." (Markandaya, 2008, p. 192).

There is no sense of heroism in Bashiam's voice. The tone is marked by acceptance rather than courage. He does not speak of skill or bravery, but only of strength. In this context, physical endurance becomes a form of currency within the economy of development.

K. S. Ramamurti (1972, pp. 75–86) observes that Markandaya presents development as a structure of unequal power in which technological authority depends upon the sacrifice of indigenous labour. Bashiam's body becomes a substitute for machinery, stepping in where technology hesitates. Authority calculates risk; the labourer absorbs it.

"He possessed nothing except his strength" (Markandaya, 2008, p. 192).

This line reduces identity to labour power. Poverty leaves Bashiam without alternatives. What he owns is his body, and that body is immediately drawn into the service of the project. Development claims him not as a person, but as capacity—as expendable energy.

Conclusion

The Coffer Dams does not present development as a simple narrative of progress. Instead, it reveals a system that advances by consuming human labour. The dam rises not only through planning and machinery, but through bodies that carry exhaustion, danger, and loss.

Risk is unevenly distributed. Those in authority remain distant from immediate harm, while workers are exposed to constant danger. Even death is absorbed into routine—recorded, managed, and quickly set aside. Within this system, labour is valued less for human dignity than for endurance.

Yet Markandaya refuses to allow this cost to remain invisible. Moments such as the struggle over burial, gestures of care, and acts of recognition interrupt the smooth narrative of modernization. These moments do not dismantle exploitation, but they expose it. They remind us that development is not made of concrete and steel alone—it is built from human lives.

Bashiam's final act gathers these tensions into a single image. When machinery fails and authority withdraws, the body becomes the substitute. His action is not heroic in a conventional sense; it is shaped by necessity, obligation, and the absence of choice. Progress continues because certain individuals are placed in positions where endurance is the only option.

Through this portrayal, Markandaya reshapes our understanding of development. Advancement does not occur in spite of suffering but through its normalization. By placing labouring bodies at the centre of the narrative, she exposes the hidden human economy that underlies modern infrastructure. Progress emerges not as an unquestioned good, but as a system that continually reorganizes human value—protecting some lives while rendering others expendable.

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